E-Portfolios: A New Trend in Formative Writing Assessment

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Abstract

Implementing multiple methods of writing assessment plays a significant role in mastering this skill. This article examines assessment methods from traditional to alternative, as well as new trends in writing assessment to improve this skill of (English as a Foreign Language) EFL, (English as a Second Language) ESL learners. Both the advantages and challenges of e-portfolio based assessment have been argued. Alternative assessment employs dynamic, ongoing evaluation tools such as e-portfolios to empower learners' knowledge. Explosive growth of e-portfolios provides the opportunity to identify learners' needs. Reflection, collaboration, self-assessment, peer-assessment and self-regulation may be promoted in students by means of e-portfolios.

Keywords

Traditional Assessment; Alternative Assessmentn; Formative Assessment; Portfolio; E-portfolios

Introduction

English writing is considered a basic language skill; therefore, it is worthy of close attention. However, the achievement of better results in students' writing competence remains a complicated task for English teachers (Sun & Fang, 2009). Various conflicting theories around teaching writing skill evokes implementation factors which teachers should pay attention to, which makes it difficult for them to teach writing. On the other hand, it is arduous for L2 students to master this demanding skill (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Traditional approaches to teaching writing rely on testing the final product of learners, while editing, drafting and the process of writing are considered less important. That is why it is essential for researchers to investigate and examine new trends in writing assessment to tackle the challenges of traditional methods of teaching, which should also focus on the process of writing as well as the final

product. Although large numbers of educators agree on the advantage of using various alternative assessment approaches, their implementation is difficult because instructors are uncertain as to how to combine quality assessment with daily practice (Corcoran & Dershimer & Mercedes, 2004). Technology in learning plays a significant role in achieving this goal. Internet and its application to learning has a strong impact on changing traditional methods of writing assessment which includes new ways to measure students' ability and knowledge (Rastgoo & Namvar, 2010). Now a wind of change is blowing, and using e-portfolios as an alternative assessment is contributive to meeting modern learners' needs. With regard to modern learners in the changing world, it is crucial to adopt innovative teaching methods that integrate their IT literacy into learning. This paper aims to investigate e-portfolio based assessment as assessment tool to learn. Although e-portfolios have been used widely for assessment purposes, the benefits and challenges of e-portfolios need to be explored more thoroughly. Overcoming these challenges helps educators to realise the full benefit of e-portfolios in the learning environment.

Traditional Assessment

Traditional assessment which relies primarily on test taking strategies is considered time consuming and stressful (Babaee, 2012). In contrast to process based writing assessment, performance based assessment focuses on the final product of writing. Traditional writing assessment procedures produce reliable numerical scores for individual students (Hout, 1996). Provision of grades for learners may not be accurate or fails to provide useful indicators of how well the students write in the L2 (the second language) (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005). The focus on marks and the result of tests may be considered the most

important goal for students; consequently, they do not consider their improvement (Ocak & Ultu, 2009). Traditional tests do not assess learners as a whole because they do not meet learners' needs. They neither represent the current theories of learning, nor provide usefulness for the future. In light of traditional assessment, consequences of testing and testing outcomes for many students, particularly students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, are frustrating (Janisch & Liu & Akrofi, 2007).

Summative vs. FormativeAssessments

Summative evaluation tests refer to those assessments given at mid-term and at the end of a course to achieve a number of goals including judgement on the extent of learners' knowledge of the material, grading, offer of certificates, evaluation of progress andinvestigation of the effectiveness of a curriculum (Wiliams & Black, 1996). Stiggins (2005) claimed that summative assessment is concerned with administration of tests after learning in order to summarize the achievement of learners, report the outcome, and provide certification. Tests do not normally have an immediate influence on learning; but often impact decision making which may have profound educational and personal consequences for students (Royce, 1989). In recent years, society has come to understand the limitations of schools that merely sort and rank students. A detailed picture of students' accomplishments through tests is not usually achievable and consequently teachers are not able to identify ways to help individual students (Stiggins, 2005). On the other hand, the new trend of teaching writing skills changes the writing assessment from alternative and authentic assessment in the light that assessment and teaching are not separate entities; therefore, assessment should remain an integral part of teaching (Rudman, 1989).

Despite summative assessment, formative assessment focuses on judgments about the quality of students' work, and emphasises the extent to which something has been done or is being done; furthermore, formative assessment focusses on feedback in order to promote learners' writing competence (Royce, 1982). Formative assessment not only judges and grades students, but also assesses learners' progress during the learning process. The opportunities associated with implementing formative assessment in the classroom can create a stress free environment while summative assessment and tests taking are considered time consuming, stressful and frustrating.

Alternative Assessment

Implementing alternative assessment fosters knowledge construction, authenticity and creativity; thereby promoting initiation, compassion, self-discipline, and spontaneity in learners (Janisch& Liu & Akrofi, 2007). Whilst alternative assessment gathers evidence on how students approach and process tasks, traditional testing asks students to show what they can do, and as a result students are evaluated according to their final product rather than what they are able to recall (Huerta-Macias, 1995). Alternative assessment promotes learners' academic growth in a very personal way through testing individuals' knowledge. Furthermore, it helps learners to understand their own learning process, and offers teachers a holistic picture of student ability (Janisch & Liu & Akrofi, 2007). There are different types of alternative assessment methods in writing skills, including teachers' observation records, teacher and student reflective journals, teacher-student-parent conferences, and portfolios (Garcia & Pearson 1991, Graves &Sunstein 1992, Rhodes & Shanklin1993, Tierney & Clark 1998, Valencia 1998, Serafini 2001, Flippo 2003). Portfolios as an alternative assessment tool take advantage over traditional methods of teaching (Tisani, 2008). E-portfolios are one of the best tools to meet learners' needs, and provide meaningful learning. The integration of technology in education, as well as innovative teaching methods in recent years, has stimulated educators to teach in a much more productive learning environment (Babaee, 2012).

Portfolio as an Alternative Assessment Tool

Portfolios which are valuable collection of learners' work, enable learners to keep track of their own learning through engaging in self-evaluation and self-reflection. Moreover, by means of portfolio assessment, learners may select the best piece of work and reflect on why it is the best evidence, so student can make choices that will be beneficial (Janisch& Liu & Akrofi, 2007). Portfolios facilitate teacher-student collaboration, active learning, self-reflection and self-assessment, as well as responsibility of learning (Wasserstein1994; Shepard 2000). The popularity of portfolio assessment (PA) is mainly due to the fact that it covers various funcions at the classroom level. One of these functions is to align teaching and assessment in order to facilitate productive learning (Huot 2002; Klenowski 2002). There are basically two types of

portfolios as described by Cooper and Love (2001). Firstly, formative portfolios which include samples of students' work are collected throughout the term to show changes over a period of time. They represent the process of learning, for example, it may be used as a report to parents or guardians. Secondly, e-portfolios include proof of students' skills. The range and depth of their skills are called summative e-portfolioshaving learning outcomes. They do not focus solely on the process of learning.

E-Portfolio as an Alternative Assessment Tool

Technology provides opportunities for online activities, and it has become an integral part of learning and teaching (Zhu & Bu, 2009). Technology based learning, ease of using e-portfolios, students' interest in social media and virtual world learning encourage instructors and educators to adopt electronic portfolios in the learning environment. E-portfolios provide the opportunity of collaboration, online feedback, updating, and networking. The sociocultural view of learning suggests that students become proficient in learning by engaging in social interactions (Vygotsky 1978; Moll1990; Shepard 2000). Flexibility of e-portfolios and the range from formal to informal learning possibilities, and easy storage of learners' work, persuade a large number of teachers to employ e-portfolios in the learning environment. Bergman (1999) claimed that e- portfolios hold certain advantages over paper based portfoliosand believed that e-portfolios give learners much more flexibility because traditional portfolios are characterized with limited access to a smaller audience, i.e. instructors and parents; whereas electronic portfolios provide access to consumers all over the world. It is available at anytime to provide feedback and to check learners' ongoing progress through using e-portfolios. There are many types of e-portfolios, for instance, blog folio, web folio, Facebook based e-portfolios, Pebble Pad based e-portfolios and wiki based electronic portfolios. These strategies contribute to learning in a stress free, collaborative, and learner centered environment. Motallebzadeh & Babaee (2009), for instance, incorporated weblog based e-portfolios into a writing course in a Language School, and investigated the impact of weblog-based e-portfolio assessment on the improvement of syntactic component of writing among Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The result of the investigation represented that participants in the e-portfolio based learning did more self-monitoring by

producing more reflective writing pieces, which confirms results found by Lopez-Fernandez & Rodriguez-Illera (2009) and Yang & XU (2008) that e-portfolios in any form potentially enhance learners' self-assessment and autonomy. Moreover, while lack of interaction has been claimed as a major drawback in internet-based L2 classroom activities, the results of this study contrastively represents that receiving feedback from the teachers through e-portfolios develops a more interactive context in web-enhanced language learning modes (Motallebzadeh & Babaee, 2009).

E-portfolio and Writing Assessment

The results of a study done by Derya and Abdullah (2011) suggested that factors of previous computer experience and computer ownership influence attitudes toward computer, and the digital environment contributes to language writing skills. Furthermore, e-portfolios can be integrated into foreign language teaching curricula. Process-based strategies include the selection of the topics for writing, gather of information about the topics, drafting, revising, and editing. Process based assessment includes the assessment on what the result is, and how and why: how a student reached the result and why the result came about (Apple & Shimo, 2004). E-portfolios not only provide the opportunity to archive writing drafts, revise and edit papers, but learners are able to learn from previous feedback provided by peers or teachers. In order to help students to collaborate in terms of providing feedback, teachers are required to create a rubric. Tezci& Dikici (2011) asserted that adapting e-portfolios develops a kind of assessment which is no longer exclusive as the quality of students' work can be self-assessed, and students can develop standards. Furthermore, in determining the assessment criteria, a certain amount of negotiation between the students and teachers plays an important part. A reliable and valid rubric can be used in order to evaluate learners' writing performance in e-portfolio based assessment; and e-portfolios make students both assessors and assessed (Wolf, 1991).

Advantages of E-portfolio Assessment

Online publishing of one's work which would be visible to all Internet users leads to an increase in user motivation and self-confidence (Derya & Abdullah, 2011). Al Kahtani (1999) compared the e-portfolio to the paper portfolio, and concluded that it provides

better and easier access to content and information, and helps teachers in planning lessons in line with the progress observed in the online portfolio process. He further asserted that the e-portfolio is easier to be used and less time consuming. Implementing e-portfolios support (self) reflection, more control over learning procedure and provide flexibility for both the learner and the teacher (Avraamidou and Zembal- Saul, 2002). Universities which have adopted e-portfolio assessment include: California Lutheran University (http://ww2.clunet.edu/soe/webfolio/index.php), Portland State University (http://www.pdx.edu/unst/frinq.htm), John Hopkins University (2008) (http://cte.jhu.edu/dp/support), the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (http://www.eportfolio.org), and Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (http://www.opd.iupui.edu/coil/eport.htm) (Tubaishat & Lansari & Al-Rawi,2009)

E-portfolios for Modern Learners

The prevalence of social media among modern learners is undeniable; therefore, it is potential to develop their writing skill through social media based e-portfolios because social media have been used as an appropriate access to construction of e-portfolios. Babaee (2012) asserted that social media including Facebook, websites, and blogs are part of learners' everyday lives; and connections between daily experiences and learning processes aids learning. Online negotiation, collaboration, peer reviewing, peer feedback, peer and self-assessment are highly popular potentials of e-portfolios. Social media based e-portfolios with the focus on exposing students' knowledge to a wider audience motivates learners to produce profound pieces of writing. The possibility of posting, uploading, and tagging, sharing, and making comments is appealing for modern learners who use technology in their daily lives.

Self-regulation and Reflection

Without reflections, e-portfolios are merely a cumulative collection of work. In order to achieve the full benefits of e-portfolios, it is essential to train learners to reflect on their work. Reflection includes identification of an issue, hypothesis of the reason for its occurrence, analysis of related information, and changes (Dewey, 1933; Hatton & Smith, 1995). Reflection on saved work supports accurate information about learners' competency in many aspects of learning. Furthermore, representation of

learners' development, engagement in the decision-making, critical thinking, problem-solving and negotiation with educators about the contents of portfolios facilitate learning (Baturay & Daloğlu, 2010). Another added benefit of e-portfolios is to facilitated self-regulated learning, one of the active, constructive processes of learning. This is when learners set goals for their learning, and then making attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behaviour (Pintrich, 1999). In particular, approaching the learning tasks in a mindful and confident manner, setting goals, and developing a plan to achieve those goals are characteristics of highly regulated learners (Alexioua & Fotini, 2010).

Self-assessment and Peer-assessment

Assessment on learning represents a significant method of measurement including self and peer-assessment, and it involves developing expertise and awareness of the activities in the classroom and reflection as well (Willis, 2011). Sharing aims and criteria with peers, the acquisition of experience in self-assessment and feedback, have beneficial consequences such as self-regulation and independent lifelong learning (Gipps 2002). E-portfolios facilitate self-assessment (Fielke & Quinn, 2011) which is one of typical characteristics of successful learners, because reflection on the process and adaptation of changes contribute to their improvement (Kavaliauskiene, 2004). Self-assessment promotes learning, and also gives learners training in evaluation , leading to beneficial consequences (Oscarsson, 1989). Teachers are required to train their learners to make commenton each other in order to create a culture of collaboration in classrooms. E-portfolios enhance collaboration, and exposure to other learners' e-portfolios evokes inspiration and innovation. Furthermore, provision of peer reviews is considered highly valuable and encouraging (Chen, 2010). In order to promote student-student interaction, teachers are required to train and encourage learners to make comments on peers. Consequently, learners have the opportunity to share their knowledge and learn from their peers.

E-portfolio and Autonomy

To integrate portfolios into autonomous learning, Yang (2003) suggested that teachers should introduce the concept of autonomous learning into students. It is essential to offer guidelines to help students develop their portfolios, and to allow portfolio sharing and

checking. Learner autonomy focuses on learners' reflective thinking and responsibility (Little, 2009). The most crucial key to making a successful and quick transition from a traditional learning environment to an autonomous-supportive climate is the creation of personal autonomy which helps to increase personal motivation, and creative performance (Nakata, 2011). E-portfolios promote the set of goals and responsibility for learning; hence, it promotes feelings of ownership and autonomous learning. However, researchers advocate that portfolios hinder recognition of the urgent requirement for physical and mental engagement to facilitate learning (Shepherd &Hannafin, 2008). E-portfolios represent learners' weakness, as a result, learners' raising awareness contributes to self-directed learning.

Challenges of E-portfolio Assessment

There are several concerns related to e-portfolio assessment including time management, reliability, validity, assessment rubric, student assessment ability, and technology (Chang, & Tseng, 2009b; Barrett, 2010). Learners fail to recognize the benefits of portfolio assessment because of the substantial amount of time and effort needed to complete e-portfolios. In addition, raising concerns on spending more time on participation in self- and peer-scoring seems to increase their burden (Russell & Butcher, 1999). E-portfolios provide a multi-dimensional assessment (Burch, 1999) such as peer assessment, self- and teacher-assessment (Lin, Liu, & Yuan, 2001a, 2001b), yet challenges of e-portfolio assessment need to be discussed and tackled. The issue of reliability and validity of e-portfolioswithout precise criteria to evaluate students, unprofessional raters including teachers and learners, and engaging in new ways of assessment such as peer and self-assessment are potential challenges of e-portfolios. Chang, Tseng, Chou & Chen (2011) also asserted that reliability and validity of e-portfolio assessment are under question due to learners' inadequate assessment skills. In order to achieve the full benefit of e-portfolios for teaching writing skills, the flowing suggestions have been made.

Recommendations for Removing the Challenges

Creating a Rubric

Learners who are introduced into a new method of assessment as alternative assessment are required to be trained appropriatelyand may not be aware of the goals and reasons for implementing e-portfolios. In order to achieve the full benefits of e-portfolios, identification of criteria and goals are essential for educators and learners alike. Students need to be aware of the evaluation criteria; therefore, creating a rubric gives them the ideal, standards, and goals that need to be followed. Recognition of these criteria contributes to learners feeling of safety and well-organised. In order to assess e-portfolios Reckase (2002) designed a rubric including: 1) the extent to which learners grasps the subject matter; 2) portfolio contents; 3) reflective thinking; 4) the content richness and difficulty; 5) organisation and presentation. Burch (1999) proposed another assessment rubric including: writing mechanics e-portfolio layout, self-reflection, portfolio, and documents. Once teachers can change their perspective on how to deliver and integrate new approaches, the outcomes are likely to be more positive such as in the integration and adaptation of technology in the classroom (Derya & Abdullah, 2011).

Reliability

Compared to self-assessment, peer-assessment holds high reliability and validity (Liu &Lin & Chiu & Yuan, 2001). Allowing for peer assessment, two distinct types of reliability including internal and external reliability play a significant role. Internal or inter-rater reliability involves the consistency within an individual rater, while external or intra-rater reliability involves the consistency among distinct student raters (Bouzidi & Jaillet, 2009). In order to calculate the reliability of e-portfolio based assessment, it is essential to check both the internal and external reliability of e-portfolios.

Validity

Self-assessment generally has the highest scores; while peer assessment has the second highest; and teachers tend to assign the lowest scores (Liu, 2002). The professional judgement of teachers provides consistent teacher-based scores and appropriate exterior criterion, and having a large number of well-trained and experienced teachers as raters assures a valid exterior criterion. Therefore, an exterior criterion including teacher-assessment scores or examination scores can calculate peer-assessment validity effectively (Chang; Chen; Chou& Tseng, 2011). In order to tackle the issue of reliability and validity, it is necessary to train learners to develop an in-depth understanding of portfolio assessment (Oskay, Schallies and Morgil, 2008).

Conclusion

This article examines the effect of new strategies for writing assessment in response to traditional methods considered challenging for learners and instructors alike. Students find tests frustrating and stressful while teachers may make effective decisions based on test results. However, test results based on the students' results fail to assess students' ongoing progress over time. On the other hand, new trends of writing assessment, such as e-portfolios not only integrate learning into assessment, but also provide computer based learning and facilitate using social media in education. Another benefit of alternative assessment is attention it pays to the process of writing such as drafting, editing, and revising. Therefore, those who believe in formative assessment try to implement portfolios or electronic portfolios as long life learning tools in their classrooms, and they make their students enjoy learning in a learner centered environment where they are encouraged to reflect on their writing and progress. Since feedback and peer assessment are fundamental necessities of learning writing skills, internet and social networks can be used as tools to conduct e-portfolios to facilitate peer assessment and self-assessment. Learners can learn and practice writing in a natural, authentic, and meaningful way because in this environment they can associate e-learning with their daily life experiences.

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